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Beryl Gilroy: A Bio-Literary Overview

Daryl Cumber Dance

*Beryl Gilroy: A Bio-Literary Overview*¹

In 1992 when I joined the faculty at the University of Richmond, I taught a class in black women's literature to a group of mainly white students who had previously read little or nothing in this body of literature. One young senior--a white male--did a paper comparing the sympathetic portrayal of the white male character in Beryl Gilroy's *Stedman and Joanna* and Bebe Moore Campbell's *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*. His enthusiasm for the rich body of literature to which I had introduced him continued after he graduated, and he often wrote to me about books he was reading and lectures he was attending. In one letter he told me of his attendance at a book-signing for Bebe Moore Campbell. Afterwards he told her about his paper, but he was shocked that she didn't know the works of Beryl Gilroy. He thus felt obligated to lecture Ms. Campbell on this void in her education. I had to smile at the audacity of this brash young man for whom African American literature and Caribbean literature were a completely unknown area a few years ago. But he was now well aware of what we must be sure that the whole world knows--that Beryl Gilroy is a literary figure whose works all literate people should read. As teachers and scholars, our task is to enrich the world of literary scholarship by being sure our students read her work and begin the important task of producing critical studies that will live up to the originals with which she has enriched us.

Beryl Agatha Gilroy, prophetically named for the famous writer Agatha Christie, was born into a large family that loved books, and she developed a fascination with words and reading and writing at a young age. In *Sunlight on Sweet Water* Gilroy transports her readers back to that family in the fascinating small Guyanese village of her childhood and allows us to witness her development there among a host of memorable personalities, some of whom had been slaves as children and still remembered Africa.

Beryl Gilroy is a teacher. She earned her Teacher's Diploma and began teaching in British Guyana. She left for Britain in the early fifties. There she earned a Bachelor's degree in English and Psychology at London University, an M.A. in Education at Sussex University, and a Ph.D. in Counseling Psychology at Century University. She was the first black woman appointed as a teacher in London, where she taught many years, experiences movingly recounted in her autobiography, *Black Teacher*. She went on to become the only black principal of Beckford School in the borough of Camden. She has also worked as a counseling psychologist, lecturer and researcher. After retirement, she continues to do volunteer work, providing therapy and counseling to black children excluded from schools, to oppressed families, to black women under stress, and to mixed-race couples; she serves as well on boards and committees dedicated to improving race relations and providing other humanitarian services.

Beryl Gilroy is a wife and mother. Her life has been devoted to her family--to her beloved husband, the late Pat Gilroy, who died in 1975; to her cherished children, Darla Jane, a fashion designer, and the noted scholar Paul Gilroy; and to her adored grandchildren.

Beryl Gilroy is also *the* generous hostess in the UK to travelers--something like Langston Hughes in Harlem and Louise Bennett in Kingston. We all have heard countless accounts of how visitors looked forward to being welcomed and entertained by Hughes and Bennett, an opportunity that many recalled with much enthusiasm for the rest of their lives. Similarly, writers from the Americas flock to an audience with Beryl Gilroy in the United Kingdom, and they come away similarly enthralled by that opportunity, as I observed most recently when I witnessed a fellow Virginian positively raving as she recalled her time with Beryl as the highlight of her European tour.

Beryl Gilroy is a devoted friend. We occasionally correspond, and I can't tell you what a delight it is to hear from someone who really writes letters--chatty, descriptive, fascinating letters. I don't read her missives immediately; I wait for a chance to sit down in a comfortable chair and enjoy them the way I do a good book, relishing some of her insightful, witty, and oftentimes hilarious commentaries, such as this observation about one mutual acquaintance: "[our friend] is crooked enough to convert nails into corkscrews." Further, in every letter there is something of her work, concerns, and dreams on behalf of the education of young people--a reflection of her dedication that always uplifts me. It was no surprise then that, when she learned I was a grandmother, she offered her warm congratulations, proffered some wise counseling, and sent a carefully selected toy designed to aid my grandson's perceptual development, a toy that has given him many pleasurable hours.

Notwithstanding Beryl Gilroy's devotion and absolute commitment to all of her professional and civic responsibilities as well as to her family and friends, our honoree has found the time to produce a remarkable literary canon.

Beryl Gilroy is a writer par excellence. She has penned more than fifteen readers and other books designed for children and adolescents as well as several volumes of poetry. She has written two autobiographical works, *Black Teacher* (1976) and *Sunlight on Sweet Water* (1994). She has had published six novels: *Frangipani House* (1986), *Boy Sandwich* (1989) (which she has declared "my favorite bk"²), *Stedman and Joanna* (1992), *Gather the Faces* (1996), *Inkle & Yariko* (1996), and *In Praise of Love and Children* (1996). She also frequently lectures on her own work, on Caribbean literature, and on issues regarding black people, particularly women.

Beryl Gilroy's efforts in the field of literature are an extension of her goals and commitment in her classrooms, in her lectures, in her workshops, in her counseling sessions, and in her family. Her life has been dedicated to analyzing how we learn and to seeking ways to improve the education of our children, for as she has proclaimed, "Where there is no knowing there is fear and eventually darkness."³ In her literature too she preaches the importance of education, the work ethic, the significance and responsibility of the family, the need for compassion within our communities.

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Bringing to bear in her literature her training as a counseling psychologist, her broad experience in education, her fascination with language, her sensitivity to people, her devotion to family and friends, and her love of life, she helps us to understand and appreciate characters from all walks of life--the young and the old, the long-ago and the contemporary, the black and the white, the male and the female, the rich and the poor, the rural peasant and the city dweller. In her writing as in all of her other endeavors, she points the way to freedom, empowerment, identity, and survival for all.

With her talents, her generosity, her commitment, her love, Beryl Gilroy has given so much. Our acknowledgment today of the importance of her contributions is merely symbolic of the debt we owe her. This trailblazing educator, this innovative psychologist, this talented writer has never received the recognition and acclamation she so eminently deserves, though there are some notable honors that have been granted her. She received the Guyana Literary Prize for *Stedman and Joanna* in 1992, and in December 1995 she became the first black woman to receive an honorary degree from the University of North London. I am truly honored to be present this evening as she receives an award from the writers and scholars whose lives are devoted to Caribbean women's literature and who therefore have been most enriched and inspired by her work.

I shall close with a few lines from the poem with which Beryl Gilroy concludes "Black Girl Learning," lines that reinforce the special message that has so often inspired all of us as we have read and talked with this very special lady:

Let us talk, my sisters, without words.
Take my hands. Lead me to my dreams.

.....
With warm eyes, I embrace you.
My eager arms surround you!

.....
I will not walk away, my sisters.
My heart contains such poignant joys!
Let us winnow out the words
And leave our worlds behind us. (9)

NOTES

1. Introduction to Beryl Gilroy at the Tribute to Beryl Gilroy, 1996 International Conference of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars, Miami, Florida, April 25, 1996.
2. A handwritten notation on typed notes she gave to students to study the existential content of her novels [undated].
3. "Black Girl Learning: Words, Text and Meaning," [manuscript], 8.